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The Religious Aspirations of Labour.

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My Lord Bishop; In attempting the task—not certainly sought by me, but imposed upon me by the Bishop and Committee—of speaking upon the Religious Aspirations of the Labour Movement, I keep in mind where and to whom I speak. I am not speaking to an assembly of working men, or to a Labour Church, where it might be the first duty, while not forgetting sympathy, to be frank in criticism. But here, in a Diocesan Conference (though I gladly remember that it is not an assembly of any one class), the balance of duty inclines to the other side, and though criticism may have its place, my main task is the happier and humbler one of trying to mark the points in which these aspirations deserve our welcome and respect, and offer to ourselves instruction, reminder, or rebuke.

Such a task is a privilege. When I think of the two sides of the case—on the one side the great, historical, noble Church of this land, and the clergy and laity, who in this day strive to carry on her work and life; on the other, the religious aspirations of the working men and peasantry of England, whose grit and character have (as we all feel sure) done so much to make her what she is—there seems to me to be nothing more momentous in these days than a right understanding between the two.

But it is not a light thing, or an easy one. It needs every atom of our active thoughts; it needs all that we can give of patience, of an open mind, of considerateness. I ask God's blessing on our thoughts: I ask your own fullest co-operation.

The first thing to meet us is the obvious fact that the Religious Aspirations of Labour, *i.e.*, of the different representatives of labour, are various, sometimes to the point of mutual contradiction. This is perfectly natural. It is the characteristic of any large cause embracing men of many sorts and many kinds of bringing up. I mention it chiefly to deprecate the habit of judging the whole of a movement by the utterance of some, or many, who represent it. "Labour means Socialism, and Socialism is pretty well identified with Secularism and Atheism." This, which is not a quotation, may serve as a type, in its rankest form, of a not uncommon kind of remark. But it is at each point untrue and unjust: Labour does not always mean Socialism: Socialism means many things most different from one another; and the alliance of Socialism with Secularism is a wholly partial thing. It is perhaps not unfair to say with Gronlund (a Socialist writer) that a great deal of German and French Socialism has been Atheist, not because it was Socialist, but because it was German or French.

In my small acquaintance with Labour literature I have come across views varying by the distance which divides a writer who is content to define religion as "the possession of any one who has an ideal and acts up to it," and says that it matters little whether a Socialist uses the word God or no, from one who professes and calls himself a Christian in the usual sense of that word; or by the interval between one who, like Bax, speaks about our Lord in terms which I do not care to quote, and one who says as Gronlund does, that "if any phenomenon in the world needs explanation it is Jesus and His wonderful supremacy over the centuries." Here are words of a working man in one of our own towns, for whom I believe I may vouch,—“Only a small number of men are anti-religious. A very large number whom I know in the Labour movement are in the highest sense intensely religious men, drawing inspiration and incentive from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament and the prophets of the old, of whose Divine origin they are thorough believers.”

Numbers of working men bring their religious aspirations to the service of God in the Church, or in other religious bodies; but it is of course true that there are multitudes who take no such active part in organized religious life. It is also true that when voices representative of Labour speak as such on its religious aspirations, there is speaking very generally and broadly, a certain common mould or com-

more tendency in what they say, and that in shaping these the beliefs of Christians, even that central truth which is our life, do not seem to be largely recognized. To judge of this fairly it is essential to remember that there are three principal aspects of religion. There is its own objective character, the truth of its truths, the meaning of its words and acts, and so forth. There is, secondly, its effect upon the soul and character and life of the individual. There is, thirdly, its effect in moulding and influencing the common corporate manifold life which men as social beings live. Now it is nothing but human nature that one or other of these aspects should be at a particular time, by particular people, dwelt upon and realized with a one-sided and partial interest, and also that reactions should have their way. We have had highly theological times: we have had times of great personal piety. No one can help seeing that the present time is not one of profound thought, not one of intense inwardness; but is one of quick sympathy, of expansive interest, of organizing power. That way lies, probably, our true vocation; that way lie our hopes; that way, most certainly, lie also our very grave dangers.

Now the crucial point of the situation seems to me to be here. The new classes, if I may venture the expression, are full of these new thoughts because they themselves are, comparatively speaking, new. Remember that Labour has not, as yet, that trained habit of mental balance which is the gift of long education, that we must expect it to see a part vividly and to go for it strongly. Remember also that Labour sees close at hand, with the keenest sympathy and with personal experience, the social evils which many of us recognize, as it were, from our fireside and our arm-chairs. Ought it to be difficult, my friends, to approach such aspirations with a great sympathy, with a great patience towards inevitable one-sidedness, with a very strong belief that we have much to learn from them?

And do we not need to remember that if Labour is in some sense new, so we Christians of the Church are in some sense old? This means that we bring down with us imperishable truths; it means that we are responsible for preserving the deeply learnt experience of other generations, and parts of the whole of truth, which are not in favour at the moment; it means therefore, that we may have much work to do, which is both unpopular and prosaic; but it means also, by the infirmity of human nature, that our attachment to the old may hinder our sight of the equally sacred, equally Christian new.

I have spoken of the aloofness of labour from what is Christian. But this is evidently only one side of the picture. There is nothing more prominent in labour utterances than references to Christian standards and precepts.

What are the points in Christianity which draw men of Labour towards it?

1. There is what is implied in the name of the Workman of Nazareth. Jesus Christ sprung according to the flesh from the class of those who labour with their hands.
2. There is the connection, the imperishable connection, between the name of Christ and the idea of human brotherhood.
3. There is the fact that He went counter to ordinary thoughts about wealth and poverty, that in His challenge to the rich young man, in His beatitudes, and in His parable of Lazarus, He spoke with blessing to the poor and sternly to the rich.

For these and other reasons we find Socialists, or men of Labour, claiming Christ as their own; in such sayings as this, that "Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of Heaven and the brotherhood of man, and Socialism is destined to realize it." They are very confident indeed, that were He on earth among us now, His favour and sympathy would be given to their cause, and not that of those whom they regard as their opponents.

There is evidently here (so it seems to me) a mixture of truths which we ought to ponder increasingly and which God may be teaching us very sharply by these voices, with a one-sidedness of interpretation, such as we ought to be able to reason with and modify.

But let us go a little deeper and let me try to state what are the points in which, as it seems to me, the religious aspirations of labour are

really and genuinely religious, and therefore, of course, *so far* Christian, by their own acknowledgment and claim.

Before I do so let me excuse myself from dwelling specially on the "Labour Church." I have paid attention to its words, and they have had their effect on points in this paper. I have learnt respect for its founder, Mr. John Trevor. He began as a Freethinker in a Unitarian pulpit, and he is probably no nearer now than then to the Church's faith. Some of his words jar upon one most painfully. But I recognise through his writings, one who, having a high and generous ideal, keeps it by him when he is at work, brings his work and that of his party to trial by it, is ready to see and frank to own the lessons of experience. Let me give you two tastes of him, The first is perhaps humorous. In the *Labour Prophet* of March, 1893, he tells how he "always strove hard not to degenerate into a parson"; but in May, as he watched the struggles of his "Churches," though he still hopes that they won't come to anything like a minister, yet he adds "somehow conventionalities have a singular way of justifying themselves, even the absurdest." The second, I think you will say, has real nobility. "I do not think that the Labour Churches as organizations have definitely set themselves to satisfy the cravings of the human heart of God, I find that while there is a deal of talk about theology not being wanted, earnest people everywhere are hungering and thirsting after God. With all their faults the Churches (he means Christian churches) do seek to satisfy the demand of the human heart for God." But the Labour Church has not, I think, much real significance, except indirectly. It implies a wholly defective idea of religion; it is, though it professes the contrary, really a class body, and in the words of a member or favourer of it, it is not destined to be of much importance as a religious movement, but only as a means of spreading socialistic aspirations and as a valuable auxiliary to the Independent Labour Party.

1. But, returning to the Religious Aspirations, the first is their recognition of the dignity and value of human life of every human being, as such, and their desire to see this more adequately embodied in our institutions, and realized in our thoughts. Many recognize that only as a spiritual being, and through relation to a living God, has man any such dignity at all. Others will be brought to realize this, through the very force of their human sympathies, and the need of tracing them to some real foundation and root.

2. There is, I hope, an increasing recognition that, as it has been quaintly worded, "character takes the odd trick." It is one of the evils of a tangled time, when in the fog men mistake each other, and mistake what they meet, that, to quote a Labour writer, "there are noble men whose very nobility of heart makes them atheists." Some misconduct of those who seem to represent God, has made them mistake Him; some evil or injustice towering just above them has shut off the sun. But we may surely hope that men will more and more see the need of character, and that true depth of character, stainless honour, high self-devotion, will be recognised as being organically connected (whatever may be the case here or there) with the faith in the spiritual and unseen, with that knowledge of God which is made full in Jesus Christ.

3. There goes with the sense of human value an immense impatience of the evils which beset and bestride human life—bitter and unrelieved poverty,—the demoralizing strain of uncertain employment,—the fears of an unprovided old age; and worse than this, the cruelties of bad employers or middle-men; the horrors of vice buying women's life by money, and pandered to by the miserable poverty or pittance wages of some of the victims; and let us add, (for who knows the moral ugliness of it in the sight of God?) the unconsciousness or refusal by multitudes in all ranks of any duty to the common weal, of any universal law of labour and service binding all alike, of any higher standards of life than those of money, dress, eating and drinking, or home comfort. There is holy fire in this impatience. One of the hopes of the future is that it may glow and burn in our democratic life, consuming the horrible cankers of our public morals, and with gentler but steady flame, kindling

zeal for the bettering and purifying of every part and joint in our economic and social order. The danger is, that in what has been called "a measureless optimism," men may fancy that re-arrangement of conditions will remedy evils which have far deeper roots than they understand; that crediting the existing system with all the facts of evil, and some imagined successor to it with all the possibilities of good, they may expect far too much and achieve far too little, and may slight in hasty scorn the patient remedial work of others. But while saying this, let us frankly recognize that there *is* a hideous side to our national and modern morals, and that we want some rough, strong current to break up the common social tolerance of it, and to raise the public standard by a real lift. It may be that God will give it to us through the honest reverence of a new class for every human individuality of man or woman, though I am very sure that such reverence, if it is to have abiding power, must strike its roots deep below social and political enthusiasm to the great convictions of spiritual faith.

4. There is an aspiration for what will justify the ways of God, for some legible onward movement of the Divine purpose in man. Surely this is anything but wholly presumptuous or wrong. Speaking in a large sense, human life, in the slow course of the last half-century, and, of the decades which are to follow, seems to be settling itself into a new mould in great educated democratic societies; and while it does so, every influence which forms our thought—religious, scientific, political—speaks to us in phrases and ideas of which evolution is the key-word: that is, in terms of a single movement from a simpler to a fuller, from a lower to a higher. What, then, are our thoughts in presence of this problem of the present and the near future, thus doubly raised from the side of fact and from the side of thought? How do we interpret? On all sides we hear of pessimist interpretations, pessimist philosophy, pessimist poetry, romance, history, and science; but Christians cannot be in the last resort pessimist. Or we see, and it is perhaps the deadliest, because most inert and coldest pessimism, that people do not interpret at all. That is out of fashion with them, there is no meaning for them in history; and as for the social order, it has reached a point at which it must, they think, go on as it is, with its inevitable evils, with its meaningless fever of activity and struggle. Here is real scepticism, real irreligion; but Christians are pledged to watch for a meaning in history, to expect it, and be sure that it will be found.

Can we look then without sympathy on those who believe that we are moving towards a type of industrial and economical life, in which there shall be realized before the eyes of earth and heaven, more of those things which Christ has taught, mutual sacrifice and service, reverence for all and each, a great tenderness to all weakness? For my own part I cannot help sharing to some degree the hopes of those (to use the words of one of them) who look thus for some revelation of God's will and of man's destiny, who are inspired, as we ought all to be inspired, with the thought of being "fellow workers with God."

I feel indeed that they are far too confidently optimist: that they assume far too readily that God's thoughts must be altogether as their thoughts; that they are far too sure that the incoming of an epoch of general distributed comfort is the particular way in which the God of righteousness and love must at this time vindicate Himself. In these ways I see a great difference between them and the Hebrew prophet interpreters of history to whom they appeal. I think they often combine with these aspirations methods and moral suggestions which are anything but divine, and I resent as intolerable their way of making subscription to a particular economic theory a sort of test of entrance into the kingdom of God.

But yet I often feel that something of the spirit and principles of that kingdom is about me as I read what they write or speak. I long for the blending of new and old, for the stirring and quickening of the Church by them, for the deepening and spiritualizing of them by what the Church has in keeping.

To wait, to work, to pray for this is perhaps the best attitude of the Church just now towards the Religious Aspirations of the Labour Movement.





